*Politics and Religion Journal* 20, no. 1: 97-123
Original article
https://doi.org/10.54561/prj2001097f
Received: March 26, 2025; Accepted: May 29, 2025

# From Intervention to Insurgency: How American Foreign Policy Facilitated Jihadist Mobilization in the Muslim World

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**Abstract:** This article interrogates the intricate nexus between U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and the proliferation of jihadist mobilisations. Through situating jihadism within a broader context of historical contingencies, sociopolitical transformations and local grievances, the analysis foregrounds the decisive role American interventions and policy played in engendering conditions conducive to the articulation and diffusion of jihadi movements. Through historicising U.S. engagement in the region from the post–World War II era, initially characterised by economic expansionism and subsequently escalating into military securitisation and political involvement, the analysis underscores the far-reaching impacts of these policies. The discussion focuses on key historical turning points where U.S. interventions intersected with the spread of jihadist ideology. The article further identifies four major dynamics generated by these policies that have fuelled the rise of jihadist movements: the creation of power vacuums and weak governance structures; the intensification of sectarian divides and identity politics; widespread psychological and cultural humiliation; and the apparent dissonance embedded within U.S. policy narratives. By theorising these dynamics, this article contributes to debates on intervention and American empire and offers a reappraisal of American foreign policies that have inadvertently facilitated the very forms of ideologies and militancy they purported to suppress.

**Keywords:** USA, jihad, intervention, Muslim world, terrorism, extremism

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## Introduction

The interplay between American foreign policy in the Middle East and the rise of jihadi movements stands as one of the most intricate and significant geopolitical dynamics of our time. Over recent decades, the Middle East and the wider Muslim world have seen the growth of violent extremist groups that have deeply influenced regional stability, reshaped international security concerns, and altered global political landscapes. While these movements are undoubtedly rooted in complex historical, religious, and sociopolitical factors, considerable evidence suggests that U.S. interventions and misguided strategies have also been instrumental in fostering environments that have enabled their emergence and spread (Chalmers 2000). This essay explores how American military actions, strategic missteps, and inconsistent policies have, directly and indirectly, facilitated the development and expansion of jihadi movements throughout the Muslim world.

The United States' involvement in the Middle East grew markedly after the Second World War, driven by the region's immense oil wealth and its pivotal role in the Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union (Oren 2007). However, what initially began as largely economic and diplomatic engagement gradually expanded into overt military and political interventions. From the CIA-backed overthrow of Iran's elected government in 1953 to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s, American actions have consistently reshaped the region's political order, often leaving lasting consequences for both the U.S. and the region (Kinzer 2006).

This analysis adopts both chronological and thematic approaches to trace the intersection between U.S. foreign policy and the evolution of jihadist movements. After outlining the historical background of American involvement in the Middle East, it then examines the ideological roots of contemporary jihadism before turning to the critical episodes of the Soviet–Afghan War, the Gulf War, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the Arab Spring uprisings. Case studies from Libya, Syria, Yemen, and other conflict zones will highlight recurring patterns of flawed U.S. strategies and their far-reaching effects. Drawing on academic scholarship, declassified government records, jihadist writings, and expert analyses, this essay maps the structural linkages between U.S. interventions and the emergence of violent extremist movements. Also, this study offers insights not only into the origins of present-day security challenges but also into the theoretical need to address the region's legitimate grievances, reduce the appeal of extremism, and promote regional stability. As such, this article is not merely an academic exercise, but one with practical contributions to counterterrorism and Middle East policy formation (Lynch 2016, 255-260).

## Historical Background

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the global order witnessed a fundamental transformation as large swathes of the "Third World", including the Middle East, gained their independence from European colonialism. It is primarily in this context that the United States, the new global hegemon, began its engagement with the Middle East and broader Muslim world. As the U.S. increasingly viewed the region as vital to its national interests (Douglas 2008), it deepened its engagement, inadvertently contributing to the conditions that would eventually lead to the emergence of jihadi movements.

The overarching strategic context of the Cold War particularly influenced U.S. involvement in the Middle East. With the Truman Doctrine of 1947 committing Washington to a global policy of containing Soviet influence, the region emerged as a pivotal battlefield in this broader struggle (Douglas 2008). Particularly, American leaders worried that any Soviet foothold in the Middle East would jeopardise access to vital oil supplies, undermine the security of its allies such as Turkey and Iran, and potentially tilt the international balance of power in the Soviet Union's favour. As a result, U.S. decision-makers tended to interpret regional events primarily through the lens of the Cold War, often neglecting the nuances of local politics and popular aspirations.

One early and particularly consequential intervention in the region was the CIA-orchestrated coup against Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953. After Mossadegh moved to nationalise the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, Washington and London coordinated Operation AJAX to depose him and replace him with the more amenable and pro-Western Shah. Although the operation safeguarded Western oil interests and secured a dependable Cold War partner, it fuelled enduring anti-American resentment in the country that would help set the stage for the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Historian Stephen Kinzer contends that the coup "planted seeds of Middle Eastern terrorism" by showing that the United States was willing to undermine democratic governance whenever it clashed with its strategic or economic objectives (Kinzer 2003).

Israel also became key to U.S. policy in the region, especially after it emerged from the 1967 Six-Day war as the region's leading military power. American support for Israel, influenced by shared democratic values and domestic considerations among other factors, strained its relations with Arab leaders and populations. The widespread perception of America's unconditional support for Israel fuelled anti-Americanism across the region, something jihadist groups would later use to depict themselves as resisting American-Israeli domination of the region (Khalidi 2004, 176).

The 1970s brought pivotal changes in the Middle East that profoundly influenced U.S. policy. The 1973 oil embargo exposed how dependent Western economies were on uninterrupted Middle Eastern oil flows, heightening Washington's determination

to preserve stable ties with key oil-producing nations. At the same time, the 1978 Camp David Accords shifted Egypt firmly into the American orbit—a major Cold War success, but one that also left Egypt estranged from much of the Arab world (Quandt 2005). Together, these developments deepened America's inclination to prioritise stability and resource security over confronting deeper political grievances or advancing meaningful democratic reform.

By the late 1970s, the core pillars of U.S. policy in the Middle East were firmly in place: ensuring reliable access to oil, countering Soviet influence, maintaining support for Israel while managing ties with Arab states, and upholding regional stability. Although these strategies advanced America's key short-term interests, they also fostered deep contradictions and resentments that would later be seized upon by extremist movements. The 1979 Iranian Revolution marked the first major rupture in this framework, revealing how decades of backing unpopular rulers could culminate in the rise of a revolutionary government defined by intense anti-American sentiments (Bill 1988).

Another pivotal moment came in December 1979 as the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, turning the country into another Cold War battlefield. The U.S. decision to intervene would be one of the most consequential for America, the region, and the globe. The mujahidin fighters America armed, funded, and trained would later create the networks, capacities, and ideological framework for the global jihadist movement (Coll 2004). As we will see in the following sections, the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan exemplifies how prioritising short-term strategic objectives can undermine long-term stability.

As the Cold War ended in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new era in global politics had emerged. America was now the sole global hegemon with no near-peer competitors. It was in this context that Samuel P. Huntington's controversial "Clash of Civilisations" thesis suggested that Islam was the new rival to the West. Huntington argued, first in a famous 1993 article in *Foreign Affairs* before expanding into a book in 1996, that the shape of future conflicts would not be ideological or economic as they were in the Cold War, but rather cultural, specifically among the "fault lines" of major civilisations. Huntington argued that "the next global conflict will be between civilisations rather than nations, shaped by cultural and religious divisions rather than ideological ones." He maintained that the West's drive to impose universal values, combined with Muslims' rapid demographic growth and the revival of Islamic fundamentalism, would inevitably spark a "bloody clash" between Islamic and Western civilisations. This framework offered a ready substitute for the vanished Soviet threat and supplied U.S. foreign policymakers with a new, monolithic "enemy" around which to organise their strategic outlook (Huntington 1993).

Segments of the U.S. foreign policy establishment found this narrative appealing, especially with the unfolding events in the Middle East. They increasingly viewed Islam not as a historical and multi-faceted religion followed by millions of peace-

loving adherents, but rather as an inherent and inevitable threat. It was in this context that the 9/11 terrorist attacks occurred. Public discourse and the media painted the attacks as representing not a radical fringe of Muslims, but indeed all of Islam. In the attacks' aftermath, the U.S.' sole focus on counterterrorism led to the racial profiling and mass surveillance of millions of Muslims and people of Middle Eastern descent (Fox 2005).

By prioritising Cold War grand strategy, access to oil, and short-term stability over addressing legitimate grievances such as a fair solution to the Palestinian issue, American policies ultimately generated the resentments and contradictory policies that extremist groups would later effectively exploit. This context is crucial for analysing how U.S. interventions and policy failures contributed to the rise and development of modern jihadism.

## The Birth of Modern Jihadism

The above should not be taken to mean that modern jihadism can solely be understood as resulting from American policies. Rather, it is a complex phenomenon in which internal developments in the Muslim world, such as theological debates and difficult socioeconomic conditions, played an important role. Nonetheless, American interventions have repeatedly provided jihadist movements not just powerful grievances to use in recruitment narratives, but also the space to expand and develop their operations. This section analyses how the intellectual roots of modern jihadism intersected with American interventions to create violent jihadist movements.

The ideology of modern jihadism emerged primarily in the mid-20$^{th}$ century through the works of influential Islamist thinkers who were preoccupied with the decline of Islamic civilisation and the rise of Western hegemony. One particularly important Islamist theorist for the rise of jihadist movements was the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb. In works like "Milestones," Qutb argued that by adopting Western values and secular governance systems, Muslim societies had fallen into a state of *jahiliyyah* (pre-Islamic ignorance) (Qutb 1964). This state called for a vanguard of true believers to overthrow these governments and replace them with states based on the Sharia (Islamic law). Qutb's execution by the Egyptian government in 1966 transformed him into a martyr, with his ideas gaining wider circulation among discontented Muslims.

While ideologues like Qutb provided the ideological framework, militant jihadism gained practical momentum in the context of the Soviet–Afghan War (1979-1989). Especially crucial for the practical application of this ideology was Abdullah Azzam, an Islamic activist of Palestinian origin who helped transform the Afghan resistance into a global Islamic cause. Through the Services Bureau (*Maktab al-Khidamat*) to organise volunteers on the ground in Afghanistan, and publications like "Defence of Muslim Lands," Azzam articulated the concept of defensive jihad as a *fard 'ayn*

(individual obligation) for all Muslims when Muslim territories are invaded by non-believers (Hegghammer 2020). This theological innovation provided the religious argument for Muslims worldwide to join the Afghan resistance, establishing the precedent for transnational jihadist mobilisation.

The synthesis of Qutb's revolutionary ideology and Azzam's concept of global defensive jihad would provide an intellectual basis for Al-Qaeda and subsequent jihadist movements. Osama bin Laden, who worked alongside Azzam in Afghanistan, would make his contribution to this ideological mix. Bin Laden's innovation was to redirect jihadist mobilisation from the "near enemy" to the "far enemy", that is, from the local Muslim regimes to the United States and its allies (Gerges 2005).

This ideological transformation unfolded within concrete historical settings in which U.S. policies were deeply implicated. During the Cold War, Washington's backing of the Afghan mujahidin supplied Islamist fighters with funding, training, and a degree of international recognition. Political scientist Mahmood Mamdani characterises this episode as "the first instance of the marriage between U.S. power and radical Islam," establishing a precedent in which religious militancy was instrumentalised for geopolitical aims, with little regard for its far-reaching repercussions (Mamdani 2004, 119).

Another transformation for jihadist movements has been the digital revolution which has enabled them to disseminate propaganda globally and recruit followers without direct physical contact. However, narratives about Western aggression are still central to the content of this propaganda, as they reference specific U.S. policies and interventions as evidence. Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) propaganda, for example, frequently cited the Abu Ghraib prison abuses and drone strike civilian casualties as evidence that America was in a war against Islam as a whole (Winter 2015). These narratives are compelling, even as they distort and oversimplify complex geopolitical realities, because they connect to observable U.S. actions and real grievances among their audience.

The interplay between U.S. policies and the growth of jihadist ideology exemplifies the principle of "unintended consequences" in international relations. Measures taken to achieve short-term security or strategic goals—such as backing Afghan resistance against Soviet forces, and toppling regimes like Saddam Hussein's—have repeatedly helped create environments in which extremist ideologies could take root and spread. Recognising this connection does not suggest that the United States bears sole or primary responsibility for jihadism, which arises from complex internal dynamics within Muslim societies. Rather, it underscores how external interventions can intersect with those internal dynamics in ways that intensify radicalisation, while simultaneously furnishing extremist groups with operational advantages and powerful narratives for recruitment. As we will see in the following sections in further detail, U.S. interventions created governance vacuums where jihadist movements could expand their influence, hold territory, and even build state-like capacities.

## The Soviet–Afghan War and U.S. Support for the Mujahidin

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 and the U.S. response that followed stands as one of the most significant episodes of American involvement in the Muslim world in the 20th century. Initially conceived as a Cold War strategy to check Soviet influence, it quickly expanded into a vast covert operation that reshaped Islamist militancy's trajectory. This section explores how U.S. policies during that conflict, though effective in expelling Soviet forces, ultimately laid the groundwork for the emergence of transnational jihadist networks, fostering conditions, capabilities, and alliances that would later have far-reaching consequences for global security.

Operation Cyclone, the CIA's programme to arm and fund the mujahidin, ranked among the largest covert initiatives in the agency's history. What started with relatively modest allocations of $20–30 million annually in the conflict's early phase would escalate sharply after 1985, with U.S. assistance surging to roughly $630 million per annum by 1987 (Coll 2004).

The Reagan administration's strategy in Afghanistan was driven by the overriding goal of defeating Soviet forces, with little attention paid to the potential long-term repercussions. National Security Decision Directive 166 (1985) explicitly stated that the central aim was to "drive Soviet forces from Afghanistan by all means available." (NSSD 166, 1985) This policy escalated U.S. involvement, authorising the supply of increasingly advanced weaponry, most notably Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, which were instrumental in neutralising Soviet helicopter gunships. Although this approach achieved significant battlefield successes, it simultaneously strengthened the most extreme elements within the Afghan resistance.

In addition to providing material aid, the United States played a significant role in shaping the ideological narrative surrounding the Afghan resistance. American leaders and officials often portrayed the mujahidin as "freedom fighters" who were waging a noble struggle against atheistic communism. While this framing served Cold War objectives, it simultaneously reinforced Islamist readings of the conflict. U.S.-funded initiatives went even further, producing and distributing educational materials for Afghan refugee children that incorporated jihadist themes, including math exercises involving the calculation of dead infidels. Developed at the University of Nebraska with U.S. government support, these textbooks helped embed militant interpretations of Islam in the worldview of an entire generation of Afghan youth.

This defensive jihad against Soviet aggression would also draw thousands of volunteers from around the Muslim world. While the foreign fighters, or "Afghan Arabs", never made up more than a small portion of the total fighters (estimates range from 8,000 to 20,000 throughout the conflict), they would later form the core of transnational jihadist networks (Hegghammer 2010). Abdullah Azzam, with support from bin Laden, formed the aforementioned Services Bureau (*Maktab al-Khidamat*) in Peshawar to recruit, transport, and train these foreign volunteers. Though there

is little evidence that the CIA directly engaged with the foreign fighters, American policymakers were undoubtedly aware of their existence and jihadist inclinations.

As such, it would be an oversimplification to state that the U.S. 'manufactured' Osama bin Laden or directly financed Al-Qaeda. Nonetheless, the U.S. undoubtedly created the context in which bin Laden and other transnational jihadist could gain battlefield experience and establish networks (Bergen 2001). The jihadists the U.S. ignored for the sake of bringing down the Soviet Union in Afghanistan would later redirect their jihad against the U.S. itself.

Perhaps most consequential was the American posture toward Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. Once its central goal of expelling Soviet forces had been met, Washington's attention to Afghanistan quickly waned. Former CIA Director Robert Gates later observed that "The United States walked away from Afghanistan after the Soviet defeat," leaving the country to dissolve into civil war with little meaningful diplomatic involvement or reconstruction support (Gates 2009). This disengagement fostered a profound sense of betrayal among many Afghans. It strengthened the perception that the United States was willing to exploit Muslim populations for strategic ends while disregarding their long-term well-being.

The vacuum left in the wake of the U.S. and Soviet "Great Game" in Afghanistan would be filled by extremist ideology. Years of chaotic civil war between rival mujahidin factions would give rise to the Taliban. After their emergence in 1994, the Taliban would capture the capital of Kabul in 1996 and restore a semblance of order to most of the country. However, they also harboured Al-Qaeda, permitting bin Laden to return to Afghanistan and establish training camps where thousands of militants would train in terrorist tactics (9/11 Commission Report, 2004). These camps became bases to plan attacks against American targets, including the 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania and ultimately the 9/11 attacks.

The Soviet–Afghan War illustrates how the unintended consequences of policies designed to serve short-term strategic objectives can produce long-term security threats. While successful in its Cold War aims, U.S. support for the Afghan mujahidin created three critical preconditions for the emergence of global jihadist movements: operational capability through arms, training, and battlefield experience; transnational networks connecting militant volunteers across the Muslim world; and an ideological framework that legitimised terrorism as a response to aggression, perceived or real, against Muslim lands. As terrorism expert Peter Bergen notes, "The Afghan war was the making of bin Laden...without the Afghan jihad, bin Laden would likely have remained what he was before he arrived in Afghanistan: a wealthy, religious businessman with inchoate ideas about how the West was defaming Islam" (Bergen 2011).

The U.S. intervention in Afghanistan during the Cold War provides us with far-reaching lessons. The mujahidin's success against a superpower reinforced the belief that asymmetric warfare could defeat technologically superior adversaries, a

conviction that would inform jihadists' future strategies against the U.S. Moreover, the American intervention in Afghanistan demonstrates how external powers can exploit religious militancy for short-term strategic purposes without controlling its subsequent development, a pattern that would repeat in later conflicts. Ironically, only two decades after the end of the Russian-Afghan war, the United States would find itself mired in Afghanistan when it invaded the country in 2001 to eliminate the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, organisations its policies had contributed to the creation of.

The invasion of Afghanistan would mark not just the beginning of a twenty-year war in Afghanistan, but also a new phase in American actions fuelling jihadist movements as the U.S. imposed a new government on the Afghan people that most saw as illegitimate. America's focus on military solutions over addressing socioeconomic grievances created fertile ground for extremist recruitment as the Taliban and other jihadist groups presented themselves as legitimate alternatives to a corrupt and externally imposed government (Chayes 2015).

Furthermore, the U.S. intervention increased regional instability. U.S. military pressure pushed many militants across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, inadvertently creating the "AfPak" militant corridor in the process. This directly led to the emergence of the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), which to this day launches attacks within Pakistan while maintaining its ties to the Afghan Taliban (Abbas 2014).

## U.S. Intervention in Somalia and the Outbreak of Jihadism in Eastern Africa

The U.S. intervention in Somalia, named Operation Restore Hope (1992–1994), was launched as a humanitarian effort to combat famine in the midst of a brutal civil war. Yet this mission, despite its initial intentions, inadvertently fuelled radicalisation and helped lay the groundwork for jihadist movements across Eastern Africa, with consequences that continue to shape the region's security landscape.

When U.S. Marines arrived on Somali shores in December 1992, the country was already in a state of collapse following the 1991 ouster of dictator Mohamed Siad Barre. In the resulting power vacuum, rival warlords fought bitterly for control, inflicting immense suffering on the civilian population (USDS 1993). The United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) had struggled to deliver aid effectively, prompting President George H. W. Bush to authorise a U.S.-led intervention under the Unified Task Force (UNITAF).

Originally limited to safeguarding the delivery of humanitarian assistance, the mission broadened under President Clinton and, with the transition to UNOSOM II in March 1993, increasingly took on the ambitious goals of nation-building and disarmament. This expansion set the stage for confrontations with local power brokers, culminating in a campaign to apprehend the warlord Muhammad Farah Aideed after his forces killed 24 Pakistani peacekeepers. The effort led to the fierce

urban fighting in Mogadishu on October 3–4, 1993—an episode later immortalised in the Hollywood film *Black Hawk Down*—in which 18 American servicemen were killed, with the images of their bodies being dragged through the city's streets shocking the world (Bowden 1999, 331-335). Days later, President Clinton ordered a complete American withdrawal.

This incident would have a long history in shaping jihadist strategic thinking that American retreat could be forced through casualties. Bin Laden would later reference the event, saying, "When tens of your soldiers were killed in minor battles and one American pilot was dragged in the streets of Mogadishu, you left the area carrying disappointment, humiliation, defeat and your dead with you" (9/11 Commission Report 2004).

Meanwhile, in Somalia, the intervention contributed to anti-Western sentiment. Military operations added to the civilian death count, while interactions between the foreign troops and the local Muslim population created resentment. Extremist recruiters would later take advantage of all of these factors (Menkhaus 2004). America's hasty withdrawal was another example of the West's unreliability. The failed intervention only contributed to prolonging the governance vacuum in Somalia, creating pockets of anarchy to be filled by non-state actors, including those offering Islamic governance as an alternative (Marchal 2004). It was in this context that Al-Qaeda was able to plan and carry out its operations from and in East Africa.

The intervention also had negative consequences beyond Somalia, affecting the entire region. Somalia's neighbours were destabilised by the refugee flows, while the movement of arms and militants across Somalia's borders enhanced extremist capabilities and created networks that would later carry out terrorist operations across Eastern Africa, as demonstrated by the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (ICG 2008).

However, the ultimate manifestation of Somalia's destabilisation came with the emergence of the terrorist group Al-Shabaab ("The Youth"). While the group formed in the mid-2000s after the U.S. intervention, its rise was enabled by the conditions of state collapse, extremist networks, and anti-Western sentiment that the intervention had inadvertently exacerbated (Hansen 2013, 200-25). Al-Shabaab explicitly referenced the American intervention in its propaganda, depicting its resistance to Ethiopian and African Union forces as a continuation of the fight against foreign occupiers. The failed legacy of Operation Restore Hope lives on in Al-Shabaab's sophisticated psychological operations (PSYOPS) that target both domestic audiences and international forces (Anzalone 2020). The group has expanded its operations beyond Somalia, conducting attacks in Kenya, Uganda, and other East African countries, demonstrating how localised radicalisation can easily evolve into a transnational threat.

## The Iraq War and the Rise of ISIS

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and its aftereffects represent perhaps the most striking example of an American military intervention contributing to the spread of extremist movements. An attempt to remove a hostile regime and establish a democratic model for the region instead created conditions that enabled the emergence of a jihadist organisation whose brutality surpassed even that of Al-Qaeda, and with ambitions to hold territory: the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This section examines how specific American policy decisions throughout and following the invasion created a security vacuum, exacerbated sectarian tensions, and provided unprecedented opportunities for jihadist organisations to recruit fighters and establish territorial control.

The Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq in March 2003 was primarily justified by claims that Iraq's Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and had connections to Al-Qaeda—assertions that all subsequent investigations would prove to be unfounded (SSCI 2004). While the initial military campaign successfully toppled the regime in a matter of weeks, the U.S. failed to adequately plan for Iraq's post-conflict stabilisation and reconstruction, with profound consequences as the country rapidly descended into insurgency and sectarian violence.

Three early policy choices in post-invasion Iraq proved especially damaging, fostering conditions that extremists would later exploit for recruitment and operations. First, the Coalition Provisional Authority's de-Baathification decree purged all members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party from government roles, effectively dismantling the bureaucratic framework needed to provide basic services and maintain civil order (Pfiffner 2010). Second, the abrupt disbanding of the Iraqi army left hundreds of thousands of trained soldiers unemployed, embittered, and armed—an ideal pool for insurgent groups to draw upon (Bremer 2003). Third, the failure to secure Iraq's vast stockpiles of conventional weapons allowed insurgents to seize large arsenals, which were subsequently turned against both coalition forces and Iraqi civilians.

These decisions collectively created a security and power vacuum that several armed groups quickly exploited. Among them was the Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (The Monotheism and Jihad Group) led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian jihadist who had set up a training camp in north-eastern Iraq before the invasion. Zarqawi's group carried out a number of high-profile attacks against the UN headquarters, Shiite religious sites, and other targets before it pledged allegiance to bin Laden in October 2004, rebranding itself as"Al-Qaeda in Iraq" (Gerges 2005).

Zarqawi's strategy aimed to provoke sectarian conflict between Iraq's Sunni majority and its Shiite minority. By indiscriminately targeting Shiite civilians and religious sites, he hoped to incite a cycle of retaliatory violence that would leave Sunnis with no choice but to turn to jihadist groups for protection. In a 2004

letter intercepted by U.S. intelligence, he laid this strategy out: "If we succeed in dragging them [the Shiites] into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger." (al-Zarqawi 2005) Iraq descended into a savage sectarian civil war as Zarqawi's strategy proved tragically effective following the bombing of the al-Askari Mosque, one of Shiism's holiest sites, in February 2006.

The U.S. occupation, however, further deepened these sectarian divides by advancing policies that elevated Shiite political parties while sidelining Sunni communities. The political framework put in place under American oversight embedded sectarian identity as the foundation of representation, entrenching divisions within the state itself. At the same time, the security forces, primarily composed of Shiite personnel, were widely perceived as sectarian militias rather than neutral national institutions (Dodge 2012). For many Sunnis, who had held dominant positions under Saddam Hussein, this new order fostered a sense of exclusion and vulnerability, creating conditions in which extremist groups could more easily recruit members and mobilise support.

Zarqawi utilised a number of brutal tactics, particularly filmed beheadings and indiscriminate attacks on Shiite civilians, that were shocking even within jihadist circles, as Al-Qaeda's central leadership criticised these methods as counterproductive to their aim of mobilising popular Muslim support. Zarqawi nevertheless continued these brutal tactics until a U.S. airstrike killed him in June 2006. His successors rebranded the organisation as the Islamic State in Iraq, signalling their new ambitions to be a "state" with territory of its own.

The Islamic State was momentarily pushed back by the Sunni Awakening movement that emerged in 2006-2007. During this time, tribal leaders in Anbar province fought against the group with support from American forces, which were bolstered by a "surge" of U.S. military personnel under General David Petraeus. However, these temporary successes relied on ongoing American involvement and a genuine process of reconciliation among Iraq's sectarian and ethnic communities—neither of which occurred in the long-term (al-Zawahiri 2005).

The full U.S. withdrawal in December 2011, carried out under the Status of Forces Agreement negotiated during the Bush administration, removed an essential check on both extremist elements and the sectarian impulses of Iraq's leadership. Without American pressure, which had previously convinced him to pursue limited cross-sectarian outreach, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki increasingly centralised authority within his Shiite power base and sidelined Sunni political figures. His government's heavy-handed response to Sunni protests in 2013, including the violent dispersal of protest camps and the arrest of prominent Sunni leaders, deepened feelings of persecution and opened political space for jihadist groups to cast themselves as the Sunni community's defenders.

Meanwhile, the outbreak of civil war in neighbouring Syria in 2011 provided the

Islamic State in Iraq a new opportunity for expansion. The group sent elements to establish a presence in Syria, initially calling itself Jabhat al-Nusra (The Victory Front) before a leadership dispute led this group to declare its independence from the Islamic State. In 2013, Islamic State in Iraq leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced that his group's merger with its Syrian operations under the name of the "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" (ISIS), signalling the organisation's new transnational ambitions (Lister 2015).

ISIS's declaration of a "caliphate" in June 2014 represented the culmination of a process that had begun with the U.S. invasion of Iraq. ISIS was no longer a "group," but rather a functioning state, as it now controlled territory approximately the size of the United Kingdom, governed over millions of people, extracted resources through taxes and oil sales (Stern & Berger 2015). It also attracted tens of thousands of foreign fighters from around the globe with a sophisticated propaganda apparatus that used Hollywood-style films that portrayed its executions, while criticising Western interventions and perceived injustices against Muslims globally.

ISIS's dramatic regional expansion in 2014, including the capture of Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, demonstrated the consequences of American policy failures in both nations. In Iraq, sectarian governance and militias collapsed in the face of the group's advance. In Syria, the U.S.' lack of sufficient material aid to moderate opposition groups opened space for more extreme factions to dominate the anti-Assad resistance groups (Lister 2015). ISIS' dramatic rise also demonstrates how foreign military interventions can end with results unimaginable at their onset. A regime-change operation ended, creating the conditions for the emergence of a terrorist organisation with state-like capabilities locally and the ability to carry out attacks globally. Specific policy decisions—from gutting out the entire bureaucratic and military apparatus to sectarian political arrangements and the poor timing of troop withdrawal—directly contributed to the security governance vacuum that gave rise to ISIS. As Emma Sky, the former political adviser to U.S. forces in Iraq, notes: "The rise of ISIS is a direct result of our failure to consolidate the fragile stability that had been achieved by 2009" (Sky 2015).

## U.S. and Arab Spring

In early 2011, the United States faced a new complex foreign policy test in the Middle East as a wave of pro-democracy uprisings, the "Arab Spring," swept through the region. Although American policymakers initially voiced support for the protestors' democratic aspirations, Washington's responses on the ground were inconsistent and often cautious, contributing to instability and creating openings for extremist movements (Lynch 2012). The Obama administration labelled this approach as "leading from behind" (Anthony 2014). U.S. policy during this period was

inconsistent, marked by an absence of a clear strategy, and tended to prioritise short-term strategic interests over a long-term democratic reform process. By doing so, it helped create power vacuums and deepen grievances, facilitating conditions ripe for radicalisation (Anthony 2014).

Although the Arab Spring was rooted primarily in internal pressures, U.S. policy decisions played a significant role in shaping its trajectory. The military intervention in Libya, combined with a hesitant and disjointed approach to the Syrian conflict, reflected a broader strategy that emphasised stability and counterterrorism over a consistent commitment to democratic transition. These choices intensified existing sectarian tensions, opened governance vacuums, and created conditions in which extremist groups could thrive, fundamentally altering the region's security landscape (Anthony 2014). The following sections will explore key U.S. interventions in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, illustrating how these policies compounded regional crises and enabled the emergence and expansion of extremist movements.

*Libya: Intervention without Stabilisation*

The 2011 NATO military intervention in Libya, in which the U.S. played a leading role despite officially "leading from behind," was another example of American military actions failing to plan for post-conflict stabilisation adequately and thereby creating ungoverned spaces for jihadist groups to exploit. The air campaign, authorised by UN Security Council Resolution 1973 to protect civilians from Muammar Gaddafi's forces, quickly expanded into an operation to overthrow the Gaddafi regime (Kuperman 2015).

While initially celebrated as a model for humanitarian intervention, Libya rapidly descended into chaos as competing tribal and regional militias filled the power vacuum left behind. The Obama administration, seeking to avoid the costly nation-building experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan, decided against deploying peacekeeping forces or investing significantly in state-building efforts. Nonetheless, this "light footprint" resulted in Libya lacking the security institutions and governance structures necessary to maintain stability (Chivvis 2014).

The drawbacks of this approach became apparent in September 2012, when militants attacked U.S. diplomatic facilities in Benghazi, killing Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans. This attack, carried out by Ansar al-Sharia, a group that had emerged in the post-Gaddafi security vacuum, demonstrated how rapidly terrorist organisations could establish operational capabilities in governance vacuums (USSCI 2014). By 2014, ISIS also established itself in Libya, controlling the coastal city of Sirte and using Libyan territory to plan external operations, including the 2015 attack on tourists in Tunisia.

Much like in Somalia, Libya's collapse also destabilised neighbouring countries

as weapons from Gaddafi's arsenals flowed across porous borders to fuel conflicts in Mali, Niger, and other parts of the Sahel region. These weapons strengthened jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Boko Haram, extending the impact of the Libyan intervention far beyond its borders (ICG 2017). Former President Barack Obama would later acknowledge that the failure to plan for the "day after" in Libya was his presidency's "worst mistake" (Obama 2016).

### *Syria: Inconsistent Policy and Missed Opportunities*

U.S. policy toward the Syrian civil war has been characterised by contradictions and half-measures that ultimately strengthened jihadist groups. When peaceful protests against the Bashar al-Assad regime began in 2011, the Obama administration voiced support for democratic change, but hesitated to provide any meaningful assistance to moderate opposition groups, allowing for more extreme factions to dominate the opposition (Hof 2015).

Moderate rebels struggled to obtain arms and funding compared to the steady resources of jihadist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Qaeda's affiliate) and later ISIS. By the time the U.S. began more substantial support for vetted opposition groups in 2013, the extremist factions had already established dominant positions in many areas (Lister 2015).

The Obama administration's decision not to enforce its "red line" regarding the use of chemical weapons in 2013, instead accepting a Russian-brokered deal to remove Assad's chemical arsenal, further undermined U.S. credibility. This perceived abandonment reinforced jihadist narratives about American unreliability and the necessity of self-reliance through armed struggle rather than partnership with Western powers (Chollet 2016).

When the U.S. finally intervened militarily in Syria in 2014, it narrowly focused on combating ISIS rather than addressing the underlying civil war that had created the conditions for the organisation's rise. The Trump administration would likewise maintain this counter-ISIS focus while sending contradictory signals about American commitment to Syria's future, culminating in the abrupt announcement of troop withdrawal that undermined America's Kurdish partners, who had been essential to the anti-ISIS campaign (McGurk 2019).

Throughout Syria's drawn-out civil war, American policymakers failed to address the conflict's regional dimensions. Moreover, their focus on the symptom (jihadist groups) rather than the cause (sectarianism, poverty, and regional power struggles) contributed to a protracted conflict that killed hundreds of thousands, displaced millions, and created anarchic spaces where extremist groups could operate (Gause III 2014).

*Yemen: The Blind Drone War and Ignoring Humanitarian Crisis*

Meanwhile in Yemen, before and after the revolution against the Ali Abdullah Saleh regime, the U.S. intervention to target Al-Qaeda with drone strikes only led to the group's increased penetration in the country. The organisation turned U.S. military mistakes, which often targeted innocent civilians, into a narrative of victimhood that it used to strengthen its presence in the country's more isolated regions (Bergen & Rowland 2013).

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), considered one of Al-Qaeda's most dangerous branches, significantly expanded its territory and operational capabilities during Yemen's drawn-out civil war in the revolution's aftermath. The group governed parts of southern Yemen, collecting taxes and providing basic services, thereby increasing its legitimacy among the local populace (Kendall 2018). An ISIS affiliate likewise emerged during the conflict, conducting a number of high-profile attacks, though it never achieved the territorial control of AQAP.

While U.S. counterterrorism operations in Yemen, conducted primarily through drone strikes and special operations forces, have successfully "eliminated" a number of AQAP leaders, they have failed to address the underlying conditions that enable the group's resilience. This narrow focus on kinetic operations against identified terrorists and insufficient attention to governance, services, and legitimate political grievances exemplifies a pattern seen in U.S. counterterrorism efforts across the region (Bergen & Rowland 2013).

The expansion of drone strikes as a central tool of U.S. counterterrorism policy under the Obama and Trump administrations has generated significant controversy. While drone technology provides precision capabilities that can reduce civilian harm compared to alternative military options, documented cases of civilian deaths have created enduring resentment that further enables jihadist recruitment (Jaffer 2016). Communities living under drones, not just in Yemen, but also Pakistan's tribal areas, Somalia, and other conflict zones, have reported psychological trauma, disruption of basic social and economic life, and the erosion of traditional governance structures. The constant threat of strikes from unseen aircraft creates an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty that extremist groups exploit to portray the U.S. as waging an indiscriminate war against Muslim populations as a whole rather than targeting specific terrorists (IHR & CRC 2012).

Likewise, legal and ethical questions surrounding targeted operations, particularly when directed against American citizens like the targeted killing of Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen, have also undermined U.S. credibility in promoting human rights and the rule of law. The lack of transparency regarding strike criteria, civilian casualty assessments, and accountability mechanisms has reinforced the perceptions of hypocrisy that feature prominently in jihadist propaganda (Shane 2015).

## Patterns and Mechanisms of Blowback

The case studies examined in this essay reveal consistent patterns in how American interventions and policies in the Middle East and Muslim world have contributed to jihadi movements' emergence and evolution. These patterns constitute what political scientists and intelligence analysts often refer to as "blowback": the negative unintended consequences of covert operations that remain hidden from the domestic public but generate resentment and resistance abroad (Johnson 2000). This section identifies the recurring dynamics by which American actions have exacerbated the very problem they set out to solve, thereby extrapolating the key lessons from the above case studies.

### *Power Vacuums and Governance Failures*

U.S. interventions have perhaps most directly contributed to the rise of jihadi movements by opening up power vacuums after regime-change operations. In Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Libya, America's removal of existing governance structures without adequately planning for their replacement created ungoverned pockets that extremist groups quickly exploited. The absence of security institutions and basic services, competition between armed factions, and erosion of social cohesion in these cases almost always benefit the rise and development of jihadi organisations.

American and Western regime-change operations result in what political scientist Francis Fukuyama calls "low-capacity states," that is, states that are unable to establish effective administrative structures that can provide security, services, and legitimate governance (Fukuyama 2004). This is particularly exacerbated in societies with deep sectarian, tribal, or ethnic divisions, where the absence of effective central authority often leads to identity-based mobilisation and conflict.

Jihadist groups have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to capitalise on these conditions by providing alternative governance structures to failed or "low-capacity" states. In Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere, extremist organisations have established courts, police forces, and basic services which, though repressive, offer a form of order in chaotic environments (Hamid 2016). This governance enhances their legitimacy among local populations and provides operational space for training, recruitment, and the planning of future attacks.

*Sectarian Polarisation and Identity Politics*

U.S. interventions have also created conditions conducive to extremist recruitment by exacerbating sectarian tensions, particularly between Sunni and Shia communities. In Iraq, the U.S.' expulsion of all Baathists from the army and government disproportionately affected the Sunni community, while also making sectarian affiliation the primary basis of political representation in the new governing structure. In Syria, America supported opposition groups that increasingly took on sectarian and religious dimensions as they fought against an Assad regime dominated by the Alawite sect (Raffaella 2021).

This sectarian polarisation benefits jihadi groups in several ways. First, it creates a pool of potential recruits among communities that feel marginalised or under threat. Second, it enables extremists to present themselves as defending their sectarian community against existential threats. Third, it undermines national identity and civic institutions in favour of primordial loyalties that transcend state boundaries, aligning with the transnational vision promoted by groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS (Balanche 2018).

American policymakers have often failed to appreciate how their actions would be interpreted through sectarian lenses or how they would affect the delicate intra-communal balance. U.S. officials typically approach conflicts with a focus on state actors, regime types, and security threats, overlooking the complex identity politics that shape how local populations view foreign interventions. This cultural and historical blindness has repeatedly strengthened the most extreme elements within sectarian communities (Raffaella 2021).

*Psychological and Cultural Humiliation*

Perhaps the most profound but least measurable connection between U.S. policies and jihadist recruitment is the sense of collective humiliation many Muslims experience in response to Western military dominance, cultural influence, and perceived disrespect for Islamic values. This narrative of humiliation features prominently in jihadist propaganda, which frames violence as a necessary response to restore dignity and honor in the face of Western hegemony (Byman 2015).

U.S. drone strikes in tribal areas, support for Israel despite Palestinian suffering, the Abu Ghraib prison abuses, and the Quran desecration incidents at Guantanamo Bay all figure prominently in this narrative. While most Muslims reject violence as a legitimate response to these grievances, even if they share them, such events provide jihadist recruiters with powerful and tangible emotional examples.

The effectiveness of this narrative stems from its resonance with historical memories of Western colonialism and its ability to link individual experiences of discrimination

or marginalisation to a global pattern of Muslim suffering. By positioning themselves as defenders of Muslim dignity against Western humiliation, jihadi groups offer potential recruits not just a cause but a means to restore their personal and collective honour (Jones 2014).

### *Contradictions in U.S. Policy*

Underlying all these mechanisms are the fundamental contradictions in U.S. Middle East policy that undermine its credibility and reinforce extremist narratives. The gap between stated values (democracy, human rights, self-determination) and actual policies (military interventions, selective application of international standards) creates a perception of hypocrisy that features prominently in jihadist recruitment materials (Arkin 2002).

Similarly, the contradiction between short-term security gains and the long-term interest of a stable political atmosphere in the region creates conditions where immediate counterterrorism gains come at the expense of addressing extremism's root causes. This prioritisation of short-term objectives over sustainable solutions has repeatedly led to policies that temporarily suppress symptoms while allowing the underlying problems to fester (Rory & Knaus 2011).

These contradictions are not merely individual policy failures but reflect real dilemmas in U.S. foreign policy strategy as a whole. However, the failure to acknowledge these contradictions honestly or develop strategies that could mitigate their adverse effects has consistently undermined American effectiveness in countering extremist ideologies.

The patterns and mechanisms identified in this analysis suggest that the relationship between U.S. interventions and jihadi movements is not merely coincidental but causal, operating through specific pathways that link American actions to extremist responses. While jihadist ideology and organisations have indigenous roots in the Islamic world, U.S. policies have repeatedly created conditions that enable these movements to expand their appeal and operational capabilities far beyond what would have been possible otherwise (Chollet 2016).

Grasping these dynamics is crucial for shaping more effective approaches to both counterterrorism and U.S. policy in the Middle East as a whole. By acknowledging how past interventions have empowered extremist movements, policymakers can craft strategies that safeguard legitimate security interests while steering clear of the self-defeating patterns that have so often defined American involvement in the region.

## Conclusion

This essay has examined how U.S. interventions and failed policies in the Middle East and Muslim world have contributed to the rise, development, and spread of jihadist movements. Through detailed analysis of key historical episodes, we have identified recurring patterns by which American actions have strengthened the very forces they set out to counter. These findings have significant implications for both understanding the current security landscape and developing more effective counterrorism approaches moving forward.

The evidence presented demonstrates that the relationship between American policies and jihadi movements is not merely coincidental but causal, operating through specific pathways: creating governance and security vacuums after regime-change operations; exacerbating sectarian tensions through political arrangements; militarising essentially political conflicts; generating the psychological and cultural humiliation central to extremist recruitment narratives; and inconsistent and contradictory U.S. policy that undermines American credibility and reinforces jihadist worldviews.

This analysis challenges simplistic narratives that attribute jihadist violence solely to religious ideology, cultural factors, or irrational hatred of Western values. While these elements play a role, the historical record clearly shows that specific American policy decisions—from supporting the mujahidin in Afghanistan to dissolving the entire Iraqi army and government—created conditions and grievances that jihadist groups effectively exploited. Understanding these connections does not absolve terrorists of moral responsibility but rather recognises how foreign interventions can interact with local conditions to produce unintended consequences.

The pattern of blowback from U.S. interventions suggests several important lessons for policymakers. First, military solutions alone cannot address the sectarian tensions, legitimate grievances, and weak governance in some Muslim countries. The overwhelming focus on kinetic operations against designated terrorist leaders has repeatedly come at the expense of addressing the underlying causes, creating cycles of violence that benefit extremist narratives.

Second, regime-change operations carry enormous risks, especially when conducted without adequate planning for post-conflict stabilisation and governance. The removal of existing power structures, however repressive, creates vacuums that extremist groups are well-positioned to exploit, particularly in societies with deep sectarian or ethnic divisions. American interventions in Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan demonstrate that the costs of such interventions often far exceed initial expectations and undermine the very security objectives

they aim to achieve.

Third, the tendency to view terrorism primarily as a security problem rather than a symptom of deeper issues has led to approaches that temporarily suppress violent manifestations while allowing the root causes to fester. Therefore, effective counterterrorism requires understanding the broader social, political, and economic context in which they take place. Sustainable solutions must address legitimate grievances, promote inclusive governance, and provide positive alternatives.

Looking ahead, this essay's findings underscore the urgent need to fundamentally rethink U.S. counterterrorism and broader Middle East policy. Military interventions should be undertaken only with rigorous consideration of long-term implications, including the risks of creating power vacuums and unintended consequences. When interventions are justified under international law, they must be accompanied by robust plans for post-conflict governance, reconciliation, and addressing deep-seated grievances, and not limited to achieving tactical military goals.

Counterterrorism efforts must move beyond a narrow focus on kinetic operations to address the social, political, and economic conditions that foster radicalisation. This includes promoting inclusive political institutions, expanding access to education and economic opportunities, and strengthening local civil society. Equally important is the need to recognise the impact of U.S. actions on local perceptions and the ideological narratives exploited by extremist groups.

Finally, U.S. policymakers must confront the inconsistencies between stated values and actual policy. Restoring credibility requires aligning its foreign policy more closely with its stated principles of justice, transparency, and legitimate governance—thereby weakening the appeal of extremist ideologies over the long-term.

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**Шафик Флин**

# Од интервенције до побуне: како је америчка спољна политика подстакла џихадистичку мобилизацију у муслиманском свету

**Сажетак:** Овај рад анализира сложену повезаност између спољне политике Сједињених Америчких Држава на Блиском истоку и ширења џихадистичких мобилизација. Смештајући џихадизам у шири контекст историјских околности, социополитичких трансформација и локалних незадовољстава, анализа истиче пресудну улогу америчких интервенција и политика у стварању услова погодних за артикулацију и ширење џихадистичких покрета. Историјским сагледавањем америчког ангажмана у региону од периода након Другог светског рата, који је у почетку био обележен економским експанзионизмом, а потом ескалирао у војну секуритизацију и политичко укључивање, анализа указује на далекосежне последице таквих политика. Посебна пажња посвећена је кључним историјским прекретницама у којима су се америчке интервенције укрштале са ширењем џихадистичке идеологије. Рад даље идентификује четири главне динамике настале као последица ових политика које су подстакле успон џихадистичких покрета: стварање вакуума моћи и слабих управљачких структура; продубљивање секташких подела и политике идентитета; широко распрострањено психолошко и културно понижење; као и очигледан несклад уграђен у наративе америчке политике. Теоријским разматрањем ових динамика, овај рад доприноси расправама о интервенционизму и америчкој империји и нуди преиспитивање америчких спољних политика које су ненамерно омогућиле управо оне облике идеологија и милитантности које су наводно настојале да сузбију.

**Кључне речи:** САД, џихад, интервенција, муслимански свет, тероризам, екстремизам